

Source N — Extract for Classroom Use

From: Nikolai Johnsen, “Katō Kōko’s Meiji Industrial Revolution” (2021)

About this extract: This is from a peer-reviewed academic article published in 2021 in the *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*. The author, Nikolai Johnsen, researched the people and organisations behind several of the sources you have been analysing. The extract below explains how one person — Katō Kōko — connects the official World Heritage website (Source A), the “Truth of Gunkanjima” website (Source K), and the Industrial Heritage Information Centre criticised by UNESCO (Source F).

The Information Centre and Its Director

The Industrial Heritage Information Centre (IHIC) opened in Tokyo on 15 June 2020, with Katō Kōko as its Managing Director. Katō was the driving force behind the Sites’ World Heritage inscription and the central producer of historical narratives presented in the Centre.

As soon as the IHIC opened to the public, the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an official statement strongly protesting IHIC interpretations in exhibits that directly contradicted agreed conditions because these denied the history of Korean forced labour.

Korea’s objections prompted UNESCO to send a joint UNESCO/ICOMOS expert mission to the IHIC to examine its narratives. This June 2021 mission reported that:

“[T]he oral testimonies displayed [in the centre], which were all related to Hashima Island, convey the message that there were no instances of [Koreans and others] being forced to work there. The mission has therefore concluded that the interpretive measures to allow an understanding of those brought against their will and forced to work are currently insufficient.”

The UNESCO/ICOMOS mission examined the IHIC closely and had “comprehensive exchanges” with Katō Kōko. Based on their report, in July 2021 UNESCO requested that Japan improve related narratives. Johnsen argues that Katō “simply concealed her revisionist agenda from UNESCO audiences while pretending to respect the suggestions and warnings.”

World Heritage Status as a Tourist Draw

Hashima, or rather “Battleship Island,” is actively promoted as a World Heritage site by the Japanese tourism industry. In actuality, it is only the Hashima coal mine, not the island itself, that has been inscribed as World Heritage. The iconic urban ruins making the island resemble a battleship are from buildings constructed after the end of the Meiji Era, and are thus not recognised as part of the Meiji Industrial Sites.

Between 2009 and 2019, over 1.8 million people visited Hashima Island — without being informed about its wartime history of forced labour during their visit. Johnsen writes that Katō Kōko has “obscured this memory war by keeping Hashima itself devoid of relevant information, while presenting a distorted historical narrative in the IHIC.”

Full citation: Johnsen, Nikolai. “Katō Kōko’s Meiji Industrial Revolution: Forgetting Forced Labor to Celebrate Japan’s World Heritage Sites — Part 1.” *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 19:23:1 (2021). <https://apjif.org/2021/23/johnsen>

Discussion Questions

1. According to Johnsen, what role does Katō Kōko play in relation to the official heritage website (Source A), the IHIC (Source F), and the “Truth of Gunkanjima” website (Source K)?

2. The UNESCO/ICOMOS mission concluded that the IHIC's interpretive measures were "currently insufficient." What specific problem did the mission identify?

3. How does knowing this institutional connection change how you read Sources A, K, and the IHIC's own materials? Can a source still be useful for a historian even if it was produced to support a particular agenda?

Extract prepared for use with Simulating Silence: A Learning Resource from the HashimaXR Project (simulating-silence.org). For educational use.